

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fairfield, Connecticut

Week of March 8, 2006

Finding God when God is the Last Thing on Your Mind

Tuesday is Chaos Day for me. God is easy to find on Monday, my day off. But on Tuesday the e-mails are backed up to somewhere just south of Anchorage, my voice-mail box is full, a staff meeting waits, hospital and pastoral calls beckon, and decisions have to be made about this or that right now. Heaven help us if there's a funeral thrown into the mix. Where's God on Tuesday?

I have learned a lot from the spiritual writer Caroline Myss—even though some of her ideas come from out beyond Pluto. One of her insights helps me get through Tuesdays, so I share it with you, just in case you have days like that too.

We often, Myss observes, regard faith as something that should shield us from chaos. We believe naively that if we say our prayers and go to church and do the right thing most of the time, well God should make our lives work out. But the unhappy reality—one that drives many people from faith and the church—is that the divine economy doesn't work that way. A good report card does not ensure that God acts like a considerate parent to give us smooth sailing.

In fact, Myss teaches, spiritual maturity is to be so deeply grounded that we can stay focused on God even in the midst of chaos and know that God is most dramatically at work then, because chaos gives God plenty of room to maneuver.

Cooperating with chaos can indeed be fruitful, provided we have the ego strength to let our ego be quiet and let God work through us (often enough, I lack that strength), and so bring meaning and order, in God's own time. Genesis 1 calls that creation.

Psychologists have described a certain "beach-master personality," referring to the commanders of the World War II D-Day landings. The beach-master thrives on acting with an imperious—should I say god-like?—certainty about what goes where and who does what when.

I guess that's o.k., if you're born with that gift. But most of us, I suspect, have to learn about God's ability to create through us in chaos by discovering it through frustration and trial and error. And by holding onto faith long enough to see meaning emerge eventually.

Our task is to hold our faithful center of being and dance on the waves.

Faith is born by risking the possibility that chaos is the medium in which God works. Faith lives in the conviction, borne out by many trials, that this is indeed how God works. Faith is sustained by experiencing over and over again, with the insight of hindsight that

sees the traces of grace, that God has been there, and will be again. Even when God is the last thing on our mind.

—Rev. Ben Brockman

Week of March 15, 2006

Waiting

On my day off, I like to putter around and fix things, or at least try to. Recently I finished my major task and turned to what I thought would be a simple repair of my electric drill. Seven bolts, easily removed, held the two halves of the case together. Then, as I used a screwdriver to separate one half from the other, they separated all right—and lots of cogs and spindles fell out before I could see what came from where.

Simple job becomes hard job. I figured and finagled, got the brushes back against the coil and snuggled into their little slots just right, and the cogs and spindles replaced. But I just couldn't get a large spring clip to seat properly. I tried everything I could think of. I held the edges of the spring with small pliers. I squeezed and manipulated, sliding the pieces this way and that.

I faced an unspeakable humiliation: having to buy a new drill because I couldn't put one that was working just fine back together. The fact that I'm telling you this is a clue that the story doesn't end here.

It crossed my mind to discreetly throw the pieces away. But it was dinner time, so I decided to just forget about it and look at it again next week.

And I did. I truly forgot about it. And then, after dinner, when I truly hadn't given the drill another thought, it came to me to take the spring clip out (grease had held it in place when everything else fell out), insert it into the top half, put the spindle through it, and then put the halves together. Bingo.

Or Eureka. That's what Archimedes said when he had given up on finding out how to find a sure-fire way of telling pure gold from a nearly pure alloy. After he quit thinking about it, as he settled into a brim-full bath, he hit upon the physics of specific gravity. Pure gold displaces less water than does an alloy of the same weight. Or at least that's how I remember it from high school physics. (Tell me if this is incorrect, dear reader!)

The amazing truth is that often enough the critical insight comes after we quit working on the problem. When we turn our attention to living life, rather than solving the problem. Isaac Asimov wrote a wonderful essay, titled as I recall "The Eureka Phenomenon," about how frequently this happens in scientific discovery.

The spiritual truth concerns the stature of waiting. I am impatient to resolve things. To finish tasks. To complete projects. I really hate to just start over. Or, yes, that too, to turn around or stop and ask directions when I'm driving and get lost.

Many, many people have told me they also have difficulty waiting. We are so anxious to do something. Who was the wit who turned the slogan around: "Don't just do something, stand there!" Psalm 37 says, "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him . . . do not fret yourself; it leads only to evil." Inspiration emerges, but won't be forced out of hiding. Isn't Lent deeply about being still, waiting? And a blessed time it is.

—Rev. Ben Brockman

Week of March 22, 2006

The Provision of Strawberries

We had strawberries for dessert last night. Fresh, delicious, perfectly ripe strawberries. While munching them, I thought about it being March 21, with the temperature outside around 35 degrees. No strawberries in any gardens around here.

When Shakespeare's contemporary dramatist Christopher Marlowe wanted to convince his audience of the diabolic power of Mephistopheles, he had him conjure up strawberries in mid-winter for Dr. Faustus' astonished delight.

I wondered what sleight of the grocer's hands produced my strawberries, but the packaging divulged no information.

Then I realized that I have come to take mid-winter strawberries for granted. Is there a month of the year when strawberries aren't available? My mind pictures fleets of 747's laden with strawberries zooming around the world like airborne migrant workers as strawberries come into season somewhere and end up on my table.

How quickly I take the most extraordinary things for granted. Until something reminds me that this too has been provided by hands and minds not my own. Including, in the case of last night, the dinner preceding dessert.

In the men's group's discussion of the Oscar-winning movie *Crash* last week, one of the things we noticed was how angry almost all the characters are.

They are thwarted by life as it declines to bend to their demands. Pursuing an ever-elusive bliss defined by having their unobstructed way, they are quite oblivious to the labor of others who make their world possible.

In contrast, to live a spiritual life is to dwell in an attitude of gratitude. But to arrive at gratitude requires noticing that virtually everything that surrounds us and sustains us is not of our providing. Strawberries. The chirrup of the cardinal this morning. The glorious

sun of the spring equinox flooding my window. The telephone message from a friend. My wife's good morning kiss. The recollection of my granddaughter's first steps Saturday. Even the energy and motor coordination and education that permit me to type these words are finally not of my own providing.

This Prayer Book collect concludes the service of Compline, which is read before going to bed. I think it's a good one to start the day with too. A prayer of gratitude for "providence":

"O God, your unfailing providence sustains the world we live in and the life we live: Watch over those, both night and day, who work while others sleep, and grant that we may never forget that our common life depends upon each other's toil; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

—Rev. Ben Brockman

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Week of March 29, 2006

When Words Fail

I enjoy words. I enjoy employing the apt word, and try not to let the playfulness this sentence manifests infect my prose tiresomely. Words usefully communicate our thoughts. Reducing our thoughts to words indeed clarifies what we think.

But happens when words fail? A person facing cancer surgery described being worried about his inability to pray as the day for the operation approached. He just couldn't get words around his thoughts, which kept flying off into chaos.

It doesn't even require a life-threatening situation to bring me to the realization that I don't know what to pray for. One-word prayers pop in to my mind: Help! Please! Now!

The good news is that the very act of praying, even the bare desire to pray, is an effective prayer. We have Saint Paul's word on it. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26).

The great Romantic poet Wordsworth found that such moments his thoughts lay even "too deep for tears."

One form of prayer makes a virtue of our speechlessness. I call it “the prayer of silence,” and I commend it to your attention just as I commended it the person facing surgery. In this wordless prayer, we quietly turn our attention to God and affirm our intention and willingness to be transformed by God into the person God has created us to be. Focusing on our breathing helps to calm our minds, to rest in God’s presence, and to give our willingness to be transformed a chance to work. I find it helpful to imagine that I am breathing God in and breathing anxiety out as I focus on each in-breath and out-breath.

For more information, go to St. Paul’s web site, www.stpaulsfairfield.org. In the navigation links on the left of the screen, click on Prayer under Christian Education, and on the new screen click on Prayer of Silence in the detailed Christian Education menu.

Thousands of people have found that making a habit of the prayer of silence, or modes of prayer like it, provides great spiritual blessing. A significant benefit of this habit of prayer emerges when we get to those moments when words fail and our prayer is “Help! Please! Now!” We have invited God’s presence. We have the memory of resting in God, the memory of being refreshed by God, of living and moving and being in God, as the foundation upon which our helplessness rests and within which our wordlessness is contained and blessed.

—Rev. Ben Brockman